RESEARCH AND THEORY

Perceptions on safety management within South African small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on study of small and medium enterprise (SME) business owners on South Africa on the extent to which their businesses comply with safety legislation, the shortcomings in implementing legislation and the level of safety education of the owners and managers. A questionnaire was used to gather information and data were collected by means of computer-aided telephonic interviewing. A total of nonrandomised 1 222 calls were made and 200 questionnaires were completed. The study found that although most small businesses have occupational health and safety policies there are still many that do not have. SME owners are not completely convinced that the policies are effective in influencing accidents in the workplace and, although risk assessments are conducted, this is often not done through a formal system of rating hazards. With training mostly done in-house respondents do not seem to recognise the need for formal training. This situation influences the safety situation of SMEs in the country negatively. Respondents agreed that increasing awareness of safety issues and safety training and education are important aspects in reducing accident rates. Addressing these issues will not only produce a safer working environment, but would probably lead to cost reduction and savings and, more importantly, a reduction in the accident rate in the SME sector in South Africa.

Keywords: education and training, incident rate, OHS legislation, safety policy, SME's, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Any workplace presents risks and hazards, irrespective of the size and sector within which

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it is positioned. Injuries on the job cost the South African economy in the order of R121 billion a year. A large number of economically active workers are lost through occupational injuries and diseases, and this amounts to about 5% of the South African gross national product (GNP) (Mardon, 2010). Despite global efforts to address occupational health and safety (OHS) concerns, an estimated 2 million work-related fatalities and 330 million work-related accidents still occur each year worldwide (International Labour Office, 2009).

A survey on occupational injuries and illnesses done in the United States indicated that, although the incident rates for injuries and illnesses decreased significantly in 2008, it still occurred at a rate of 3.9 cases per 100 equivalent full-time workers among private industry employers. The total recordable case injury and illness incident rate was the highest among enterprises employing from 50 to 249 employees and the lowest among enterprises employing fewer than 11 employees (United States, 2009). Although SMEs contribute only 25% to the GDP, 97% of all enterprises in South Africa are classified as small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) (Banhegyi et al., 2009). Previous research and other literature (Antonsson & Lamm in Champoux & Brun, 2003; Kheni, Dainty & Gibb, 2008; Vasse, Tomas & Oliver, 2000) indicate that SMEs all over the world struggle with or do not implement and/or do not spend much time on the management of health and safety matters. Generally, accident rates in SMEs are also higher when compared to larger enterprises. The main reason for this seems to be SMEs' limited access to human, economic and technological resources, which hampers their ability to assess and control occupational risks effectively (Hasle, Bager & Granerud, 2010; Micheli & Cagno, 2010).

The high accident rate of SMEs in South Africa and the limited number of empirical studies published on the subject prompted the research on which this article is based. The research aimed to capture the situation of SMEs in South Africa regarding the extent to which they comply with legislation, the reasons for non-compliance, and the accident rate. The article also presents possible recommendations to improve the situation. The high accident rate costs SMEs more than most owners/managers realise. If this rate could be reduced, it will not only save owners a lot of money, but will also decrease the accident rate of employees in South African SMEs. The findings of the research reported on in this article may lay a foundation for further research where attempts could be made to further investigate the accident rate and means to decrease it and measure the causal impact of training and education provided.

In order to ensure a common understanding of the research area, the basic terminology used in this article is clarified as follows:

- SMEs are an extremely heterogeneous group of businesses and include a variety

of firms that possess a wide range of sophisticated skills, which operate in different markets and social environments (Hallberg, 1999). In South Africa, the definitions of SMEs and SMMEs differ from one economic sector to the next. For the purpose of this article, SMMEs (which include SMEs) are businesses with fewer than 250 full-time paid employees. Annual turnover could not be used to classify the businesses, as most of the respondents were not willing to disclose their financial figures.

- Safety management is the way in which procedures or policies are used in order to control the risks (Harms-Ringdahl, 2004).

- Risk management is the identification, assessment and prioritisation of risks followed by coordinated and economic application of resources to minimise, monitor and control the probability and/or impact of unfortunate events (Hubbard, 2009).

- A hazard is the intrinsic property of a substance or process or thing to inflict damage or harm (Makin & Winder, 2009).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Any working environment presents risks and hazards in different forms. SMEs, whatever product they manufacture or provide or whichever service they render, are not excluded in any way from such risks and hazards. Not only does this situation require the owners and managers to take care of safety issues, but the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSACT) 85 of 1993 (Republic of South Africa, 1993) describes it as a punishable offence when workplaces are not regulated and the Act is not complied with.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SAFETY?

Managers and/or owners of SMEs are considered to be the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the SMEs, and the OHSACT stipulates in section 16(1) that the CEO of a corporate body is the person responsible for the overall management and control of the business. The CEO is therefore the person responsible and liable for complying with the OHSACT. The CEO may assign and delegate any duty contemplated in the subsection, including the power of further delegation, to any person under his or her control, whereby that person shall act subject to the control and directions of the CEO. Such a person is assigned duties in accordance with section 16(2) of the OHSACT. The OHSACT stipulates clearly that managers and/or owners of SMEs bear the responsibility for the implementation of

OHS strategies, and that they have to do everything expected of them to minimise the accident rate (Republic of South Africa, 1993). Because so little research has been done about the management of safety and health in SMEs in South Africa, and so little has been published on the subject, a wide selection of international works have also been studied for purposes of this article.

In order for SME owners or managers to control and eliminate potential harm or environmental impacts, risk management should be regarded as an important part of organisational management. There are some symptoms that can be observed directly due to their presence in the workplace and the visible harm they cause. Examples of these are the physical environment of the organisation and the chemical materials workers are exposed to. Due to their nature, ergonomic and psychological problems are more difficult to identify, for example, it is not easy to identify whether a worker is experiencing work stress. Several practices that can be used by SMEs to control the observable impacts were outlined by the authors. They are legislation, codes, training programmes and assessment processes. SMEs should take great care in the selection of a structure to manage hazards (Makin & Winder, 2009).

Making use of consultants is another option to assist SMEs. Walker and Tait (2004) found that most small enterprises are not making use of this source due to the fact that they believe it to be too costly and because they regard the advice the consultants give them as too complicated. The authors therefore suggest that these enterprises use a 'minimalist' approach, which includes factors such as a low-cost and simple management system in order to achieve an effective health and safety management system.

Because the majority of SMEs are relatively uninformed about the issues concerning OHS management of their employees, some SME employers even believe that there are no safety management problems and are unable to detect obstacles or problems within their prevention programmes. The reason is that the majority of SME owners are relatively uninformed about the issues concerning the OHS management of their employees. Reporting on a study done by Champoux and Brun (2003) in Canada, the authors suggest that SMEs follow a quality management approach and use safety aspects within such a programme. SME owners should also keep in mind the specific management style they are using as this will contribute to the overall practical application of such a programme. SME owners must learn to give more responsibility to their employees and let them participate in the safety management programme, thus nurturing an effective safety culture.

According to Lingard and Holmes (2001), who studied construction firms in Australia, the responsibility for external control measures lies with the government, trade unions

and the employers, to improve the management of risk in the workplace. Improved risk management could be accomplished by employers who follow regulations and inspect the workplace on a regular basis to ensure that the OHS procedures are enforced. It is the employees' responsibility to understand the risks involved in the workplace and to follow the safety measures provided to them.

COMPLIANCE WITH SAFETY MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

Because literature in South Africa is limited, reference is made to what is available internationally. Managers and/or owners of SMEs experience problems with the compliance with safety management programmes. Many of them are financially fragile and a prevention programme seems less attractive to them. They often perform most of the business functions within the business themselves and because of this they cannot manage or be experts in every aspect of the business. Most of them are also fairly young and lack knowledge in terms of the risks involved. They think that the risks involved in a small workforce are less than in the case of large firms. They might not have the ability or personality to exert authority and may find it difficult or even uncomfortable to give tasks to their employees (Antonsson & Lamm in Champoux & Brun, 2003). Limited access to resources hampers SMEs' abilities to control occupational risks and lead to higher accident rates when compared to large enterprises (Micheli & Cagno, 2010).

The study by Kheni et al. (2008) done in Ghana revealed that control measures for health and safety are only implemented by a small number of SMEs. The reason they cite is the lack of awareness about health and safety legislation. Vassie, Tomas and Oliver (2000) found that SMEs do not spend much time on the management of health and safety matters and on the fact that the senior management plays an important role in achieving a positive enterprise health and safety performance.

Small enterprises have unique circumstances and deal with safety in different ways. According to Hasle, Kines and Andersen (2009), owners of SMEs in Denmark reject the fact that accidents are caused by circumstances under their control. Injured workers of SMEs often do not learn from an accident in the workplace and return to the same "hazardous" conditions. The authors suggest that owners and workers need to be educated to enable them to identify prevention measures that are relevant and effective. They should also take on a positive learning attitude to build a trust relationship with the third-party safety professional.

Research done in West-African SME companies demonstrated that overall safety, health and environmental (SHE) management performances were poor. Only 6.6% of the

companies had a basic SHE management system in place. To improve this, leadership, administration and planned inspections need to be improved. Although money is often a problem, expenses for SHE prevention are justified (Meité, Baeyens & Dewil, 2009).

A study of the situation in Thailand by Kongtip, Yoosook and Chantanakul (2008) found that some of the SMEs employed employees who were more vulnerable to hazards, such as people younger than eighteen and older than sixty. Employers and employees also tend to work overtime in order to be financially more independent. Longer working hours mean less resting time and this can cause more accidents. The authors also found that more education regarding the control measures is needed and safety elements such as accident reports, investigations and inspection should be implemented to help manage OHS.

When designing and implementing a health and safety management system, the size of the enterprise should be taken into account (Micheli & Cagno, 2010). Kheni et al. (2008, p. 1167) agree with this viewpoint and state that the size of an enterprise can be positively correlated with the management of safety and health practices and is also strongly correlated with organisational characteristics such as the number of employees and turnover.

ACCIDENT PREVENTION STRATEGIES

As point of departure, a framework to regulate accident prevention in the workplace was developed in Australia. This framework, according to Kelman, Boehringer and Pearse (in Holmes, Triggs, Gifford and Dawkins, 1997), has the ability to put disputing parties in agreement and commit them to regulate prevention. The framework is not affected by social factors and can be applied in any workplace. The size of the business will not affect the outcome. The framework consists of four steps and starts by using research data to identify OHS or safety risks in the workplace. The second step is to survey a sample in order to enable the employer to identify the risk conflicts. The employer then groups the priority risks into three categories or intervention measures. The employer and employees should list and prioritise the risks that they agree upon. After that has been done, a specific approach should be designed for each category identified. The fourth step is the evaluation of the strategies used. Employers must ensure that prevention strategies are clear and easy to understand and government agencies should encourage employers and employees to actively accept responsibility for prevention in the workplace (Holmes et.al., 1997).

Makin and Winder (2009) also provide a framework to support SMEs in managing their safety programmes. These authors use the three main areas of a safe working

environment, safe employees, and a safe management system. The enterprises can use this OHS management structure to customise the elements identified according to their specific needs. The authors compared this OHS management model with other structures in Australia and suggested that enterprises should use a combination of the strategies available.

Tangkittipaporn and Tangkittipaporn (2006) indicate that changes should be made towards safety by improving the working conditions and the commitment of employees. They also suggest that, by enforcing policies, government agencies improve safety management in the informal sector. At the same time, the informal sector can gain optimum results if workers could be encouraged to support and engage in the prevention and control practices. Once again, this refers to nurturing a safety culture in the working environment.

SME owners, managers and employees need to see the importance of a culture of safety at work. A culture of safety comprises individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies and patterns regarding safety (Carayon, 2011:135). Creating a culture of safety in a business is not only the responsibility of management, but also of all the personnel, from the managing director to the newest and most inexperienced member of the workforce. A culture of safety is created through commitment at all levels of a business (Arden, 2010:1-4).

While only 6.6% of the companies surveyed by Meité et al. (2009) in Kenya had a SHE management system in place, much improvement can be expected with some goodwill and management support. The priorities of any improvement plan must be "leadership and administration" and "planned inspections". A continuous safety risk assessment is required. Policies and procedures can be seen as the heart of a good prevention programme and do not cost much to implement (Schein, Roumieux & Pilla in Meité et al., 2009). According to Lloyd (2011) most employers have good intentions and realise that workplace inspections could help identify and correct unsafe working conditions and reduce the risk of injury.

In South Africa the OHSACT is in place to provide for the health and safety of persons at work and for the health and safety of persons in connection with the use of plant and machinery; the protection of persons other than persons at work against hazards to health and safety arising out of or in connection with the activities of persons at work; to establish an advisory council for occupational health and safety; and to provide for matters connected therewith (Republic of South Africa, 1993). It is important that SMEs should comply with OHS legislation and that they should implement and manage all safety-related matters as prescribed by the OHSACT, with specific reference to section 7 and 8

regarding policies and the identification of risks and hazards by means of inspections. The official body conducting inspections in South Africa is the Department of Labour. According to the Department's 2011 annual report, 189 160 routine inspections were conducted during 2010/2011, 20% less than planned. During these inspections, 33 129 notices and 1 380 compliance orders were issued to the different industries inspected (Department of Labour, 2011:44).

The OHSACT prescribes the implementation of a system in which health and safety representatives are able to inspect the workplace regularly and report all findings to a health and safety committee. The health and safety committee must make recommendations to the employer about improvements regarding health and safety in the workplace. Section 17 of the OHSACT stipulates that any employer with 20 or more employees must designate health and safety representatives in writing. For shops and offices, the OHSACT stipulates further that there should be at least one health and safety representative for every 100 employees or part thereof, and for all other workplaces that there should be at least one representative for every 50 employees or part thereof. The duties of health and safety representatives are set out in section 18 of the OHSACT. They include reviewing health and safety measures, identifying potential hazards and potential major incidents, examining causes of incidents, investigating complaints, making representations to the employer or health and safety committee, and inspecting the workplace. Health and safety representatives must give reasonable notice to employers regarding their intention to carry out inspections. All of the findings must be recorded and reported to the employer or to the health and safety committee. Section 29 and section 30 of the OHSACT cover all matters concerning the health and safety inspectors of South Africa's Department of Labour. These inspectors may enter any workplace, question anyone in the workplace, examine and copy documents, inspect and remove any item that is or was on the premises, invite interpreters, members of the SAPS or anyone else to accompany them, and block off any unsafe workplace areas (Republic of South Africa, 1993).

OHS EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Many accidents occur causing suffering to all the people involved as well as loss to the company involved. Considering this, preventing accidents and removing hazards become essential. Accident prevention is not only about making the environment safe, but also about improving the knowledge, skills, attitude and morale of the employees. Unsafe conditions can be eliminated by engineering revision for example, but safety education is vital for correcting unsafe acts of employees (Elangovan, Mohammed & Mohan, 2005).

A recent study in Ghana confirmed the need for higher educated safety practitioners to

reduce work-related injuries and deaths (Gyekye and Salminen, 2009). In a study done by Hayes, Perander, Smecko and Trask (1998) in the United States of America (USA), the results also indicated a positive association between education and safety perception. Higher-educated workers recorded the best perceptions on safety, indicated the highest level of job satisfaction, were the most compliant with safety procedures and recorded the lowest accident involvement rate. Tait and Walker (2000) found that most qualifications regarding health and safety in the United Kingdom involve little or no training regarding the requirements of small enterprises' health and safety management.

In South Africa, Unisa is currently offering the National Diploma as well as the Baccalaureus Technologiae in Safety Management (Unisa, 2011). This will not only contribute substantially to recognising the professional status of safety managers, but will also focus on achieving professional competence to perform safety management functions and roles through acquiring applicable knowledge and mastering applicable skills. Appropriately qualified safety and health practitioners will be able to contribute to curbing the high level of occupational injuries and deaths (Van Loggerenberg & Swanepoel, 2010). The only other institution in South Africa offering the National Diploma: Safety Management as a three-year course is the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) (Vaal University of Technology, 2011). According to Van Loggerenberg and Swanepoel (2010), Unisa is developing a BCom Safety Management degree for the near future. The fact that only two service providers in South Africa offer a safety qualification at this level seems inadequate.

ACCIDENT/INCIDENT RATES

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in the USA, the main or primary indicator of safety performance is the incident rate, which indicates the frequency of occurrence and severity of incidents. Recordable incidents (incidents that OSHA deems to be recordable under its recordkeeping regulations) include all work-related deaths, illnesses, and injuries which result in a loss of consciousness, restriction of work or motion, permanent transfer to another job within the company, or which require some type of medical treatment or first-aid (Bidassie, McGlothlin, Goh, Feyen, & Barany, 2010). In reporting incident rates, the focus tends to be on the negative issues in a safety system, rather than on what is positive or right about the system. Still, many companies use incident rates as the primary indicator of safety performance measurement. Incident rates are widely used, fairly easy to calculate and can be used to compare between companies and economic sectors (Anon, 2011).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the study reported here was to investigate the present OHS situation of SMEs in South Africa. The secondary objectives were to determine:

- whether SMEs comply with OHS legislation in South Africa;
- the reasons for noncompliance with OHS legislation;
- the level of safety-related education and training of SME owners/managers; and
- any possible relationship between the incident rate of SMEs and the compliance with legislation by SMEs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and results are subdivided into the following sections: the characteristics of the participating businesses, the occupational health and safety policy, compliance with legislation, shortcomings, safety education and training, and accident rate.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPATING BUSINESSES

The majority of respondents interviewed (70%) were owners of the businesses. This positively indicated that the information reported on was mostly from informed representatives. The majority of respondents were white (90%), males (64%). The most prominent age group represented was 31 to 45 years old (49%). Nearly half of the respondents (46%) had a tertiary qualification with at least a three-year diploma or degree. While 34% of the SMEs participating in the study were located in Gauteng and 24% in the Free State, all the other regions in South Africa were represented in the study. The respondents were mainly in the retail and motor trade repair services, community, social and personal services and manufacturing. Nearly half (47%) of the SMEs had been in existence for more than 10 years and another 25% for 6 to 10 years. The majority of the businesses (55%) had fewer than 10 employees, while another 37% had from 11 to 49 employees. There were only 3% who had more than 250 employees.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY POLICY

Although 85% of the respondents indicated that they had an OHS policy, the main concern was that there were 15% of SMEs in the sample who did not have such policy.

The industries mostly guilty of not having a policy were the finance and business services (50%), manufacturing, catering, accommodation and other trades, and community, social and personal services. Those SMEs who did not have a policy in place were mostly those who had been in existence for less than one year and who had less than 10 employees.

COMPLIANCE WITH LEGISLATION

Although business owners and managers displayed confidence in the sufficiency of the policy, and its ability to address risks and hazards, there was less confidence in its success in influencing incident rates. When the sufficiency of their OHS policy was rated, the SMEs in the following sectors showed some negative responses: manufacturing, retail and motor trade repair services, and community, social and personal services. The size of the business and the time the business had been in existence did not seem to make a difference regarding the sufficiency of the OHS policy.

Nearly half (48%) of the workplaces were inspected regularly (weekly or monthly) by either the owner, manager or safety representative, whereas a quarter (26%) were inspected less frequently (one every 6 months or less). A small number of companies (15%) indicated that they did not have a safety representative, whereas 61% had either one or two representatives. When the process of risk assessment and rating hazards was considered, most small businesses:

- conducted a risk assessment when a hazard had been identified (80%);
- had a process of identifying hazards (74%); and
- had a monitoring or review system following up on identified hazards to ensure they had been corrected (73%).

In terms of the OHSA, safety committee meetings were held at least once every three months by most but there are a number of SMEs who never hold these meetings. When meetings are held, more that 75% are attended by the appointed members or representatives.

As many as 15% - mostly SMEs with fewer than 10 employees and SMEs who had been in existence for less than one year - indicated that they had no safety representatives. Of those that had safety representatives, 85% thought that these representatives knew their responsibilities.

Seventy-four per cent of the SMEs taking part in the study had a process of identifying hazards. When hazards had been identified, 80% conducted a risk assessment to help determine the best way to eliminate or control the risk. Just over half of the SMEs (55%) had a system of rating hazards. The rating systems in place were described by the respondents and are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Rating systems in place as described by the respondents

Responses regarding the rating systems in place	Percent
Before you start the work you do a risk assessment	25%
We do regular inspections	20%
We have checklists/procedures that need to be adhered to	12%
Inform my superior/manager (all incidents must be reported)	10%
We have safety officers on site	9%
Learn from incidents to ensure that they don't happen again/ build on previous experience	8%
We do regular training	6%
All our workplaces are accredited	3%
We attend to any and all problems	3%
I don't know	3%
People must wear the proper safety clothing and equipment	3%
We have a maintenance crew	2%
We explain the risks to our staff/education of staff	2%
Never had any problems/We are not at risk	2%
We comply with standards	2%
Clearly marking the fire extinguishers/emergency assistance signs	2%

Most of the businesses had a monitoring/review system in place to follow up on identified hazards, ensuring that they had been corrected.

The negative responses regarding the compliance with safety management programmes

are supported by research done by Antonsson and Lamm (in Champoux & Brun, 2003) and Kheni et al. (2008).

SHORTCOMINGS

Two main themes emerged as reasons for noncompliance with OHS legislation. The first most prominent theme related to the relevance of their business. The owners and managers of the SMEs did not feel that they needed legislation. They believed that they were too small, that they complied in another way, or that their particular industry or sector did not warrant compliance. These SMEs probably did not realise that risks and possible hazardous conditions exist in an office environment as well. Ergonomics, wet floors and the sick-building syndrome are just a few examples. Another prominent theme related to neglected safety administration. SME owners believed safety administration was necessary, but had not come round to implementing it. Other studies in Canada (Antonsson & Lamm in Champoux & Brun, 2003) and in Italy (Micheli & Cagno, 2010) revealed similar results but also identified reasons such as limited financial resources, expertise and experience.

SAFETY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

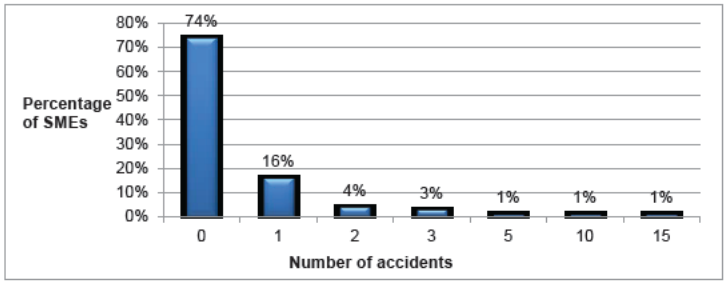
Respondents had generally not attended formal safety training courses. They also did not demonstrate a keen interest in attending such courses in future. Only 45% of the respondents said that there was some type of safety education/training provided to the employees. The courses they attended included first aid, health and safety and fire-fighting. Courses they would like to do included fire-fighting, health and safety, engineering and small business management. The mining and quarrying, construction and transport, storage and communication sectors were those that mostly provided their employees with safety education and training, while the catering, accommodation and other trade sector provided the least. It was thus the larger SMEs who provided their employees with safety education and training more that the smaller ones.

Although some of the respondents did not seem to realise the importance of safety-related education and training, other studies proved that there is a need for higher educated safety practitioners to reduce work-related injuries and deaths (Gyekye & Salminen, 2009), that safety education is vital for correcting unsafe acts (Elangovan et al., 2005) and that there is a positive association between education and safety perception (Hayes et al., 1998).

ACCIDENT RATE

In most cases (74%), SMEs reported that there had been no accidents in their company and 16% reported an average of one accident annually. Of the SMEs in the study, 10% reported more than one accident per year as indicated in Figure 1. Although the majority of SMEs (93%) indicated that they had no serious injuries, 3% reported one and 4% reported two and more injuries per year, while 1% even reported 10 serious injuries per year. This relatively high accident rate was also supported by other research (International Labour Office, 2009; Mardon, 2010).

Figure 1: Accidents per year



Correlations and cross-tabulations were done to determine whether there were any relationships between variables. The following relationships were considered:

- the accident rate per year and the existence of an OHS policy;
- the accident rate and the business sector of the participating SMEs;
- the accident rate and the length of time the business had been in existence;
- the accident rate and the location of the business; and
- the accident rate and the size of the business.

Although 85% of the respondents indicated that they had an OHS policy, the highest incident rates were also found amongst them. The accident rate of the SMEs with no policy was very low. This indicates that, although policies were in place, too many accidents still happened and business owners need to make sure that policies are not only in place but are also adhered to as far as all the different aspects are concerned. The majority of accidents occurred in the transport, storage and communication, manufacturing, and electricity, gas and water agriculture sectors, while the sectors with the lowest accident rates were finance and business services wholesale trade, commercial agents and allied services, and community, social and personal services. The length of time the businesses had been

in existence and the location of the businesses did not seem to make a difference to the accident rate. Generally, all the time categories and provinces in South Africa showed similar percentages of accidents. The SMEs with 11-49 employees had a much higher accident rate than the smaller ones. Although they constituted only a small portion of the sample (2.5%), the SMEs with 50-250 employees also had a very high accident rate.

CONCLUSIONS AND PREVENTION IMPLICATIONS

Investigating the present OHS situation of SMEs in South Africa revealed that the majority of SMEs in the agriculture, transportation, storage and communication sectors had an occupational health and safety policy in place. However, several of SMEs in the financial and business services sectors do not have such a policy in place. The respondents from these sectors mistakenly seemed to think that the policy was less relevant in their environment. The small business sector is not completely convinced that the policy is effective in influencing accidents in the workplace. Regarding the process of risk assessment, most SMEs conducted a risk assessment when a hazard had been identified and they had a process of identifying hazards and a monitoring or review system following up on identified hazards to ensure they had been corrected. However, when assessments were done, they were not always done through a formal system of rating hazards. When safety committee meetings were held, many of the appointed members did not attend these and there was even a number of SMEs who never held these meetings. The two main reasons for not complying with legislation were that the respondents did not feel that they needed compliance and that it did not seem important enough to them. Limited resources and expertise, which were found as reasons for not complying with legislation (Antonsson & Lamm in Champoux & Brun, 2003; Micheli & Cagno, 2010), were not identified as problems in the study. Training was mostly done in-house and although literature is clear that safety education and training is essential (Elangovan et al., 2005; Gyekye & Salminen, 2009), respondents did not seem to recognise the importance and need for formal training. Any accident rate is too high and the results from this research confirmed this.

The results indicated that many SMEs still do not have an occupational health and safety policy in place. Therefore, it can be assumed that if there is no policy in place for whatever reason, there are probably no inspections, safety representatives, risk assessments, no process of identifying hazards and no safety committee meetings either. There are many of the SMEs who had at least one and as many as 15 accidents as well as quite a few with serious injuries annually. Within these SMEs there does not seem to be an atmosphere of care for the employees and obviously no guideline to control occupational injuries and illnesses.

Despite all the legislation, however, and even if it is complied with, the workplace will remain a hazardous place unless safety education is implemented, with the first line of responsibility lying with the managers and/or owners of SMEs. SME owners should not only manage safety but also implement an effective safety management system and should encourage employees to support and engage in prevention and control practices, thus creating a culture of safety in their businesses. Improving these issues would not only ensure a safer working environment, but would probably lead to cost reduction and savings and, more importantly, a reduction in the loss of lives through occupational injuries and diseases in the SME sector in South Africa.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Cofesa is not demographically representative of the SME owners in South Africa, with only a small number of members in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape provinces. Although members of Cofesa own or manage SMEs in all the sectors in the economy, this is also not completely proportional to the sector distribution of SMEs in South Africa. Owing to these limitations, the study is not fully representative of SMEs in South Africa. The research also relied exclusively upon the views of respondents. This means that bias could potentially have been introduced to the information gathered, because owners might not have fully revealed the lack of OHS security measures.

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